



March 10, 2012

Mr. Obang Metho, Message to Ethiopian Women

An International Meeting for Ethiopian Women: Empowering Women by Advancing Their Rights; *Sponsored by EWCCC*

Dear Esteemed Ethiopian Women:

My and the SMNE warmest greetings to all of you present at this very important international meeting of Ethiopian women. All of us should appreciate the vision, commitment and leadership of the women who organized this very important forum on: *"Empowering Women by Advancing Their Rights."*

I am very proud of all who have worked tirelessly to put this together. I truly wish I could have been with you; however, when I was invited, I already had made a previous speaking commitment, but please know that I am with you in spirit. What you are doing gives me hope that the women of Ethiopia will play a strategic role in creating and sustaining a new Ethiopia where all our people can live and thrive.

Right now our country is facing great stresses—politically, economically, socially and spiritually. When you look at most of the international indexes of poverty and well being, Ethiopia is always near to the bottom of these lists. When times are difficult, it is our women who bear the heaviest loads as they work so hard to care for their families despite the lack of food, resources or security. That means that Ethiopian women carry some of the heaviest burdens in the entire world.

No wonder the image of Ethiopia has become that of our loving mothers trying their best to care for their malnourished children for it is truly our Ethiopian women are our caregivers, our nurturers and our protectors. They are the backbone of our society even though their contributions are often not appreciated and their God-given rights are not respected by the law of the land.

When we speak of women's rights, we are really speaking of basic human rights that everyone who is a human being should be given without question. When we personalize it, we are speaking of our own mother's rights, our sister's rights, our grandmother's rights, our daughter's rights and our granddaughter's rights. There is no boundary between women's rights and the rights of others for we are part of each other. Ethiopia needs empowered women who will take their place at the table, not just as a woman, but because women are equal human beings with God-given worth, skills to share and purpose in this world.

In my own case, you may already know that I have become a social activist for justice, but you may not know my back story. When I was very young, it was my grandmother's great sense of compassion and firm belief in justice that set the foundation for this work. I spent much time with her after my mother had twin boys and she influenced me greatly. She had the ability to see the humanity of others and strongly believed we should speak up for them if they were treated unjustly. Though she could see this truth, physically she was blind and needed help with many things. I used to help her carry wood, which, at the time and still now, is considered "women's work" in Ethiopia. Some laughed, but I didn't care.

I saw how difficult life was for her and my mother. Both my mother and my grandmother were the ones who really gave me the heart for what I am doing today so when people talk about women's issues, it is something deeply engrained in my heart and not only seen from a distance for when we talk about marginalized people and marginalized women, I know what this means.

Today, *Ethiopian women in our country make up half of the population; yet, in terms of political representation or participation in the mainstream, they are pretty much at the bottom. We often talk about an apartheid system in Ethiopia that discriminates against people based on ethnicity, political affiliation and allegiance to the crony-based regime of Meles Zenawi; however, in Ethiopia, apartheid is also based on gender and on who is strongest physically or politically.* Again, *our valuable women are taking the brunt of our dysfunctional and violence-based society. They experience more domestic abuse than women in most any other country. This is both shocking and shameful and must change! It has no part in a New Ethiopia!*

Dear Esteemed Ethiopian Women:

In the country, opportunity is out of reach to most women. Women are often overlooked or pushed to the side, especially when it comes to education. In Gambella, women with post secondary degrees only number fifteen or twenty. If you look at the some of the other most marginalized regions of the country like the Afar region, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations or the Ogaden, it will be the same. In fact, educational opportunity for women in other regions is also dismally low.

Can the Ethiopian train of freedom, justice, peace and prosperity get to its destination if we leave the women behind? The answer is NO! This is our individual and collective failure. There is no way Ethiopia can move ahead to become a New Ethiopia including half our nation of women for a nation that does not empower its women is doomed to fail.

Today, when our young men leave the country, some of them dying on the road to freedom, the women often remain behind taking full responsibility for their families. When the people speak out for justice, like Eskinder Nega, it is often their wives who must take up the full responsibility of providing for their families. When women who come to the front, like my respected friend, sister and esteemed leader, Birtukan Mideksa, when she was imprisoned, it was her elderly mother who took the responsibility to care for her daughter. Most of you know about this.

Ethiopian women are in such desperate conditions that thousands of young women end up going to the Middle East to find jobs as maids where they are often abused and exploited like our beautiful sister Shewaye Molla, with whom I am in regular contact. Many others are in harm's way like today's video footage shows of an identified Ethiopian woman, screaming for help as she is being physically forced into a car by men in Lebanon. This tragic example of abuse has become the sad image of our beautiful women.

Dear Esteemed Sisters:

Our dream and hope is for a New Ethiopia to emerge, but we will never achieve it without the empowerment of Ethiopian women whose participation in every aspect of our country is sorely needed. However, we are stuck in a self-destructive cycle of tribal politics where those in power could care less about the freedom and well being of others. How can we break out of it? Maybe we need a mother who can feed and nurture a starving nation. Maybe God is looking for women to rise up to protect the same life they brought to this world. If we are to avoid bloodshed, ethnic violence and disintegration, it just may be our women who show us a way. God may be calling the valuable women of Ethiopia to nurture this dying country and to call people back to life-affirming values.

In the Biblical account of Esther, a nation was in danger of being exterminated. Esther became queen and was called to risk her life to protect her people, yet she was afraid and feared what might happen to her. She was told that she may have come to this place of opportunity “for such a time as this.” She took the risk and her people were saved.

Perhaps you also have come to this place of opportunity in the same way. As women in the Diaspora, you have a louder voice than ever before. You have more education, experience and resources at your disposal than your sisters at home have ever dreamed. Has God put you in this place “for such a time as this?” Is it by accident that you are here or does God have a larger purpose for you, both individually and as a collective group?

All of you are needed. God does not call only the most educated or privileged, but each and every one of you—from the women in the Omo Valley with plates in their lips to the modernized women on the streets of Addis Ababa wearing red lipstick; from the barefoot in Beni-shangul-Gumuz to the beautiful Oromo women in Wandabiti (skirts) in Jimma; from the women wearing hijabs in the Ogaden to the women in the Amhara region wearing their pure white Shashe (headscarves); from the women of Afar carrying water on their heads to satisfy the thirsty to the women of Tigray carrying wood on their backs to cook food for the hungry. These women are YOU and you are THEM! There is no “you” or “them.” We need women from every walk of life. Can you in the Diaspora help and then reach out to empower the women back home to do the same? Do not wait for your rights; take your rights! What is holding you back? We need you! This may be your time!

Today, you have won a battle by coming together but the victory is still in the distance and cannot be fought alone. In a New Ethiopia, humanity will come before anything else because we all were created by the same God who loves us and who has given each of us value beyond our differences. This is the Ethiopia for which we should be fighting! This is the kind of Ethiopia I stand for and I want to pass on to my daughters, my daughters-in-law and my grand-daughters! I also want to pass the same on to yours.

You can count on me and the SMNE. We are with you to fight together to claim the victory because we believe that truth, justice, freedom, integrity, decency and prosperity will never come to one group until it comes to all of us.

May God make our Ethiopian women a blessing to our country and to our people. May He empower and guide you to step out with strength, courage, love and truth to help salvage a nation in ruins so it might be revived! May God help you to become reconcilers of our divided people. We have suffered too much to hold on to the bitterness, anger and vengeance of the past.

Who will be the people, both women and men, who together will forgive, who will bring back justice to Ethiopia and who will help heal this wounded nation? *As stated in the Bible, a time will come when Cush will reach its hands in submission up to God Almighty. Could this be that time now? For the sake of God’s/Allah’s glory and for the precious Ethiopian people He loves, may our great and powerful Creator fully equip us for such a time as this!*

Sincerely, your brother
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